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ABSTRACT

The challenge of changing belief systems to engender educational change is explored in this bulletin, which asserts that the current American educational system inadequately prepares students for productive participation in a rapidly changing information-oriented society. Change in the United States culture implies that alterations in education are also necessary. The change from "maintenance" to "evolutionary" kinds of learning, or a transition from fixed to proactive thinking skills, is advocated. Change strategies for people-oriented institutions requires recognition of the problem as ecological and interactive, definition of beliefs that determine which goals are right, review of policies in light of those beliefs, and changing beliefs. (16 references) (LMI)

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INSIGHTS ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

Number 10

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The high school graduating class of the year 2000 entered kindergarten in September 1987. In order to provide these students with the knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills they will need for productive participation in our democratic society, those responsible for guiding the educational system must understand that changes are occurring in United States culture that argue for change in the way schools are educating students. Researchers are saying that the nation needs a new system based on a cohesive set of fundamental beliefs that will shape policy and practice to achieve desired goals.

Changes In United States Culture

The United States educational system will be expected to educate a group of children who will be poorer, more ethnically and linguistically diverse, and who will have more handicaps that will affect their learning than have students in the past (Hodgkinson, 1985). The implications of this becomes clear when looking at the profile of high school dropouts. They are usually from low-income or poverty settings. They often are from minority backgrounds and English is often not the major language spoken in the home. Dropouts usually have very low basic academic skills and have parents who are generally uninvolved in their children's progress in school. Many are the children of single parents. While 14% of white students are dropping out, the dropout rate for blacks is 24% and for Hispanics, 40% (Hodgkinson, 1985).

In addition to being a tragic waste of human potential, the dropout problem is an economic problem. In those states where a high percentage of youth graduate from high school, almost every young person becomes a "net gain." Those who graduate have a high probability of getting a job and repaying the state, through taxable income, for the cost of their education. Those youth who fail to graduate, however, become a "net loss" and often become an economic burden in one way or another (Hodgkinson, 1985). In Texas, for example, two-thirds of those receiving Aid-to-Families-with-Dependent-Children payments and 90% of the inmates in prison never finished high school (*Texas Humanities Newsletter*, Spring 1989). At the national level, the estimated cost of the 500,000 students per year who leave school before graduation is about 50 billion dollars in "forgone lifetime earnings alone" (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986).

The emergence of the *information society*, accelerated by the integration of computers and telecommunications, has created the most pervasive societal changes. The United States' information-based economy is characterized by a body of knowledge that is doubling approximately every 40 months (ATE Blue Ribbon Task Force, 1986). Such an economy requires increasing levels of literacy for individuals to participate fully. By the year 2000, service jobs will account for almost 90% of the economy and about half of those jobs will involve collecting, analyzing, synthesizing, structuring, storing, or retrieving information (Cetron, Rocha, & Luckins, 1988). Even traditional jobs now call for more familiarity with technology — sales clerks have to be "computer literate" to use a computerized inventory system. With fewer jobs available for those with minimal skills, minority students who are economically disadvantaged must be assured the educational opportunities necessary to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to qualify for the more technical, higher-paying jobs.

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The Need for a New System

Clearly, the public school systems that now produce dropouts and poorly prepared graduates must change if they are to provide all students with the kind of education they need to be successful in the twenty-first century. Resnick has pointed out that the "factory" or "mass system" of United States education has traditionally offered a curriculum focused on "the old basics" — developing skills in routine computation, basic decoding, reading predictable texts, and reciting codes that enshrine the past (*The Education Deficit*, 1988). This kind of curriculum results in a type of learning that has been labeled "maintenance learning." Such learning involves acquiring fixed outlooks, methods, and rules for dealing with known events and recurring situations (Botkin, cited in Banathy, 1988). It promotes established ways of thinking and behaving appropriate for fixed structures in a stable society. Today's students, however, need new sets of understandings, ways of thinking, skills, and attitudes if they are to function productively in the twenty-first century (Hutchins, 1988).

The Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (1986) pointed out that, in a country dependent on trained intelligence, schools must be institutions in which ideas and their application are central. Schooling must involve teaching attitudes and abilities that enable students to learn new skills readily in the future (*The Education Deficit*, 1988). Students will need the ability to apply what they have learned to problems they have never seen before, to work together with others on projects requiring joint effort, to understand not just *what is so* but *why it is so*, and to demonstrate a capacity for creativity (Carnegie Task Force, 1986). This requires that emphasis be placed on the understanding and transfer of learning to untaught problems or situations. The knowledge that students accumulate during schooling may be less important than the learning skills and habits they develop (Crooks, 1989).

This kind of learning — a type of learning that is anticipatory and innovative — has been labeled "evolutionary learning" by Banathy (1988). Evolutionary learning enables individuals to anticipate and face unexpected situations. It helps them develop the ability to manage change within the environment and within themselves. Evolutionary learning promotes the determination to shape change rather than just react to it. It enables individuals to engage their creativity, to explore alternatives, and to design unique systems (Banathy, 1988). Such learning should be a goal of education.

The kinds of problems that are inherent in the existing educational system — the structured fragmentation of the school day, the isolation of teachers, the emphasis on extrinsic rewards, the split between life-relevant and school-relevant learning, the weak sense of ownership by teachers of the schools in which they work — will not be remedied by demanding higher standards, requiring longer school days, or adding more courses to the curriculum (Eisner, 1988). As a teacher attending the June 1989 National Education Association conference in Washington, DC, pointed out, "...schools need to be totally revamped.... because schools haven't changed in 50 years while society has been changing enormously" (McQueen, 1989).

The nature of the problem involved in improving schools is ecological and interactive (Eisner, 1988). There are, however, few reform efforts that focus on effective school systems or the effectiveness of the entire educational enterprise (Whitford & Hovda, 1986). Although libraries are filled with educational research and development literature, an appropriate metaphor is that of a warehouse full of odd vehicle parts that have not been assembled into a working whole (Banathy, 1988). The

profusion of educational improvement programs and products do not provide a blueprint for integrating the parts into an educational "system" or for integrating the educational system into the larger social system. Educators need to develop a new perspective that encompasses the possibilities inherent in system-wide change. Such a perspective envisions an educational system where every part acts in concert with every other part and all actions are guided by a cohesive set of fundamental beliefs.

Changing the System\Changing Beliefs

People-oriented institutions change slowly, as a result of the evolving beliefs, attitudes, and values of individual persons. In recent years, social scientists and educators have explored the processes involved in changing beliefs. Their findings suggest that a first step is for people to become aware of their existing beliefs and see a need for changing them. Next, changing people's beliefs requires creating conditions for change rather than imposing reforms. It requires open systems of thinking. It requires an atmosphere in which relationships are friendly, individuals feel important, and their participation is encouraged and valued. People must have opportunities to do the following (Combs, 1988):

- confront ideas, problems, beliefs, values, goals, objectives, and possible alternatives;
- discover and explore new ways of seeing and thinking in interaction with others; and
- experiment, make mistakes, modify positions, and try again, preferably with others of like mind.

Conclusion

To effectively change the system, those engaged in educational reform must determine what is truly important. Reform must concentrate, not on external things like programs, gadgets, and methods, but, rather, on altering the belief systems of the people who make the decisions and do the work (Combs, 1988). Watson (cited in Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 280) wrote about his experiences at IBM in *A Business and Its Beliefs:*

> I believe the real difference between success and failure in a corporation can very often be traced to the question of how well the organization brings out the great energies and talents of its people....Consider any great organization — one that has lasted over the years — I think you will find that it owes its resiliency not to its form of organization or administrative skills, but to the power of what we call beliefs and the appeal these beliefs have for its people. This then is my thesis: I firmly believe that any organization, in order to survive and achieve success, must have a sound set of beliefs on which it premises all its policies and actions. Next, I believe that the most important single factor in corporate success is faithful adherence to those beliefs.

Efforts to redesign the educational system will fall short of the mark unless the new system is based on a set of fundamental beliefs that become the framework for action. Peter Drucker admonished long ago that it is not enough to do something right; it is important to do the right thing. An educational community intent on reform must first define the fundamental beliefs that will determine which goals are the right goals — which goals are the ones that should be pursued — and then review its mandates, policies, and practices in the light of these fundamental beliefs.

The July issue of INSIGHTS, Number 11, will continue the discussion of the power of beliefs with a summary of the Belief Statements and Declaration of Intention developed by a group of Texas educators.

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